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TAGS: [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [NATO](#) [LO](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR OBSITNIK'S MEETING WITH NEW SLOVAK
DEFENSE MINISTER BASKA

REF: 07 BRATISLAVA 578

Classified By: Ambassador Vincent Obsitnik for Reasons 1.4 b and d

11. (C) Summary. In their first official meeting, Ambassador Obsitnik and new Slovak Defense Minister Jaroslav Baska discussed Afghanistan, missile defense, and the MOD's pending transport aircraft tender. Baska confirmed that Slovakia had signed an MOU with the Dutch on the second phase of deployments to Uruzgan, as well as ongoing talks with the Canadians regarding contributions, including an OMLT, in Kandahar. Baska expressed his view that he would like Slovak troops to operate without caveats and would work to create an atmosphere in which this could become possible, but did not commit to any change. He reiterated the GOS official line on missile defense, e.g., the importance of NATO discussions, and urged continued outreach to Russia. Baska told the Ambassador that an expert group led by the Slovak National Armaments Director was evaluating Slovak Air Force requirements for a military transport aircraft, with an eye to issuing a tender in the coming months. Baska said regardless of the aircraft type, the GOS would prefer to extend payments for 8-10 years and would seek offsets. End summary.

Afghanistan

12. (C) Minister Baska confirmed that the GOS had signed the week of March 10 an MOU with the Dutch on additional cooperation in Uruzgan Province (ref a) and that it was in talks with the Canadians regarding potential contributions in Kandahar. The first element of the Canadian request is for an OMLT. The Slovaks would provide a total of 12 personnel: 6 to be deployed in March 2009, followed by an additional 6 in September 2009. The proposal calls for the Slovaks to assume full control of the OMLT in 2010. The second element of the Canadian request is for 45 troops to guard Kandahar airbase. Baska suggested that the latter request was in the very preliminary stages of consideration. (Comment: All requests to increase troop ceilings would require Parliamentary approval. Such approval should not pose a problem.)

13. (C) Ambassador Obsitnik welcomed the report of possible additional deployments and urged Baska to work toward lifting restrictive national caveats. Baska responded that Slovakia was not the only Ally to operate with caveats -- which are the "right of every country" -- but added that he, personally, would like to remove them. It will take time,

Baska explained, because "we politicians" have stressed the safety of the mission to such an extent that the public is not prepared for casualties. Baska said that he wants to change this and begin to build awareness among the public that the military is a unique profession that requires sacrifice and sometimes loss of life. Baska added here, without providing further detail, that he intends eventually to deploy the underutilized Slovak Special Operations Forces, which he described as a "tiger in a cage." Baska stressed the need to educate the public about the progress that has been achieved in Afghanistan thanks to NATO: new schools, infrastructure, etc. He plans to work more closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which will have the lead in this effort. At the same time, he wants to promote more seamless civ-mil cooperation by strengthening interagency cooperation.

Missile Defense

14. (C) In response to the Ambassador's question regarding Slovakia's stance toward missile defense at the NATO Summit, Baska stressed the importance of Alliance-wide consultations on the technical, legal and financial issues related to linking U.S. and NATO missile defense elements. He also urged continued U.S. and NATO discussions with the Russians, even as he acknowledged it was unlikely that Russia would change its position as a result.

Transport Aircraft/SAC

15. (C) Noting that price and availability information for the C-27J would be forthcoming by early summer, Ambassador Obsitnik asked Baska if the Ministry had reached any

decisions regarding specific transport needs. Baska replied that a council of experts headed by the Slovak NAD currently was reviewing Slovak Air Force requirements and once the "most suitable one" had been identified, the government would issue a tender. Baska stressed that the GOS would prefer to finance the purchase over a 8-10 year period and would seek direct offsets, per a new government policy (Note: not law) requiring offsets in any projects whose value exceeds 6 million Euro. Ambassador noted that while the USG cannot provide offsets, the tangible downstream benefits of purchasing through the FMS program are significant. Baska agreed to continue the dialogue after the MOD has taken a decision on the tender.

Comment

16. (C) This first meeting with Minister Baska was like a breath of fresh air. Unlike his predecessor, Baska is willing to engage in a genuine give and take and exchange of views. Although Baska lacks a broad experience in defense or security matters, he conveys confidence and a willingness to learn. At the outset of the meeting he admitted candidly that, as State Secretary, there was a great deal he did not know about the operation of the Ministry. He now is focused on completing several internal reforms: including consolidating military training at the academy in Liptovsky Mikulas, modernizing equipment, e.g., aircraft, and reducing the number of uniformed and civilian personnel at the Ministry. Baska has already made staffing changes in the small circle of advisors which operated around former Defense Minister Kasisky, and, from what we can discern, he appears to be choosing individuals who, like he, are more open and accessible than their predecessors. We take him at his word that he will work toward lifting caveats, although we expect PM Fico to resist. Baska will engage in much-needed public diplomacy efforts and will cooperate more closely with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. He also would like to be more open to genuinely closer cooperation with the U.S. than his predecessor.

OBSITNIK